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# Towards a New Agenda for Design in the Mediterranean Region



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# Design and Culture of the Territory: *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane* in the Salemi Museum System

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## Keywords

Design for Cultural Heritage, Ecomuseum, Culture of the Territory, Collaborative Design, Participatory Action Research

## Abstract

The article deals with design experimentation in the complex and composite field of design for the culture of the territory, aimed at enhancing the particular resources common to the Mediterranean areas, through an incremental and collaborative design methodology.

The town of Salemi (TP) inherited an extraordinary concentration of cultural heritage from its history; in particular the preparation and display of the decorated breads for the Festivity of San Giuseppe, occurring on March 19th, which expresses a profound religiosity and a complex rituality, shared, handed down and recognized as an intangible cultural asset to be protected. In this territorial context, a vision aimed at encouraging increasingly wider cultural and tourist growth and interested in the quality of experience has led to the design elaboration and realization of an *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane*. This is an experimentation articulated through meetings with the various territorial actors, gathering experiences and testimonies, and laboratory activities. Together with the description of the project outcome, the article intends to describe and analyze the intertwining of the many aspects that have structured the design process, based on a multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary approach “necessary” for cultural elaboration and looking at design as a multidimensional and relational discipline.

## 1. Activating design in territorial realities

Once the concept of territorial capital has been defined, as a “complex of material and immaterial elements available to the territory, which can constitute growth opportunities” (Zurlo, 2003), today the designer is increasingly called to operate within the complexity of design strategies that are able to develop new ways of enhancing and using cultural assets and traditional productions rooted in the territories, and coordinating their multiple aspects (narrative, communicative, interactive, multimedia), also through open and collaborative design methods. Using this perspective, in 2018 the Department of Architecture of the University of Palermo, together with the city of Salemi has started an extensive collaboration program centered on design planning, to provide scientific support to the activities of an administration that is aiming to improve and innovate cultural services designed to exploit the rich heritage of this community. This has been an opportunity for the university to express its vocation to be not only an academic institution for research and education, but also a competent actor who works within territorial development actions based on goods and processes that produce culture, social cohesion and that strengthen the identity values of the community. In fact, design can, in certain conditions, fill the role of effective activator of valuable processes of requalification and redefinition of environments, practices and knowledge, through forms of interaction with the community and with various territorial actors. The administration explicitly supported a real *community centered design* approach in the first project action of the collaboration program launched: the conception and construction of a “Ecomuseum”, dedicated to a contemporary and

innovative reading of the territorial qualities of the city and in particular the complex practice of working ritual bread for the Feast of St. Joseph, which occurs on March 19<sup>th</sup>.

To reinforce this approach, Palermo's team of researchers and design professors, who led the experience, has extended the collaboration to the Polimi Desis Lab of the Politecnico di Milano, to activate in the project the specific contribution of services design for social innovation.

Desis Lab in fact operates in multicultural and multidisciplinary contexts, integrating various competences in systemic projects, with objective to explore how design can enable people, communities, enterprises and social actors to activate and manage innovation processes in order to experiment with sustainable and collaborative ways of living and doing.

## **2. The premises of the project: Salemi and its “dinner”**

As a matter of fact, already in the initial meetings of the project, a common vision of the management of the city emerged among the partners, addressed to an increasingly wider tourist and cultural fruition and interested in the quality of the experience. In this scenario, the *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane* was born with the aim of starting an experimental path of participatory construction of a small but innovative museum device, in order to receive the different testimonies and elaborations on the theme of the Festival, reinterpreted with sensitivity and contemporary languages, in the wider territorial context rich in landscape, architectural and artistic interest.

Throughout its history, Salemi has inherited a particular concentration of material goods (historical, architectural and various artifacts) and intangible assets; in particular the preparation

and display of the decorated ritual breads for the Festivity of St. Joseph expresses a profound religiosity and a complex rituality that is shared, handed down and recognized by the Sicilian Region in its own Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

These are small and large shapes of bread used to cover votive constructions that host the ritual of the *Cena di San Giuseppe* in public or private urban spaces; for months, these high artistic handicraft works - before the date of March 19<sup>th</sup> when the Feast occurs - occupy families and women's associations, who dedicate all their extraordinary ability to produce large quantities of these particular edible artifacts.

### 3. Ecomuseum

At the same time, Unipa researchers have defined a “state of the art” of the notions inherent meaning, history and most pertinent declinations of the concept of “ecomuseum”: from the early considerations made by Quatremère de Quincy on the importance of the museum's connection with its concrete historical-territorial reality, to the progressive definition and dissemination of *community museum* models, up to the analysis of a case study recently proposed on the same themes by a small Sicilian community.

“The real museum is indeed made up of statues, giants, temples, extraordinary artifacts and objects (...) but nevertheless it is made up of places, sites, mountains, roads, ancient streets, geographical relationships, of the relationships between all the objects, of the memories, of the local traditions, of the still existing uses, of the comparisons that cannot be made if not in the same country”  
(De Quincy, 1796, p. 166).

When, in 1796 at the dawn of the museum as an institution, Quatremère de Quincy formulated this definition, he expresses, almost two centuries in advance, the inherent complexity of the concept of museum: the collection, conservation, exposure, and valorization of the works, kept in a place often detached from the context of origin, underlie the prerogative of a parallel narration of intangible stories, relationships and meanings. It is an extraordinarily anticipatory vision, which sets out features and principles of a multi-faceted concept, dialoguing with territories and communities in this evolutionary line we can also place the particular interpretation of the museum institution represented by the ecomuseum.

“The art historian Jean Clair argues that the first ideas of what would become ecomuseology were elaborated by the museologist Georges Henri Rivière in 1936, as an extension of the idea of open-air folk museums, especially the Scandinavian model. He places Rivière’s formulation of the ecomuseum theory in the early 1950s, reaching its first practical realization in the 1960s” (Pinna, 1997, p.110).

Conceived and imagined as a structure that should have a strong impact on society, the ecomuseum was defined by the archaeologist Hugues De Varine as “an institution that, for scientific, educational and cultural purposes, manages, studies, explores the global heritage of a certain community, including the totality of the natural and cultural environment of this community” (Pinna, 1997, p.111).

Peter Davis very effectively summarizes the ambits and keywords that characterize the ecomuseum (Davis, 1999); the



community museum is a tool for creative participation in the construction of an “open” territorial identity (Cersosimo & Donzelli, 2000) and community development.

The open identity consists in a strong awareness of all the data that we are given by history and geography, by the cultural context, by the accumulation and intertwining of cultural experiences [...] The open identity must assert itself above all against those representations that tend to unify reality and thought, but also against any claim of the positive or superior character of one’s own specificity (closed identity) (Cersosimo & Donzelli, 2000, p. XV).

On the other hand, the concept of ecomuseum introduces the themes of landscape and territory as stratified entities, composed of environmental, cultural, social, architectural, anthropological elements; therefore, phenomena in progress, which require articulated reflections from the community on the relationships between past and present and the ability to project to the future.

Initially found in some Italian regions, such as Piedmont, Trentino and Friuli Venezia Giulia, the institution of the ecomuseum, differently regulated at regional level, has become an increasingly widespread reality throughout Italy. It was in Catania in Sicily, in 2007, on the occasion of the national meeting *Towards a national coordination of Ecomuseums: a process to be shared*<sup>1</sup> that a *Charter of the Ecomuseums* (Charter of Catania) was drawn up and it formulated this definition: “The ecomu-

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1. As part of the conference *Ecomuseum Days. Towards a new cultural offer for sustainable development of the territory*, Catania 12-13 October 2007. Organized by the CeDoc (Center for Documentation and Studies on Complex Organizations and Local Systems) of the University of Catania and by the Ecomuseum Laboratory of the Piedmont Region.

seo is a participatory practice of valorisation of the material and immaterial cultural heritage realised and developed by an organized subject, expression of a local community in the perspective of sustainable development” (Garro, 2014, p. 10).

#### 4. Valorization processes of traditional knowledge: a case study

It is important to note that in recent decades, awareness of the importance of biodiversity and the preservation of indigenous crop production has increased significantly, in part through research and field activities by scientific institutions and research centers. But it is mostly the communities and producers who mobilized to activate paths and initiatives for the recovery, enhancement and communication of traditional practices and knowledge linked to the production of food, which are often found in territories with unique characteristics. The involvement of the skills and creative abilities of multidisciplinary experts - such as designers - has proved to be key in the construction, often with minimal resources, of “light” but innovative, engaging and open communication devices for interaction with the local people. A significant example of the emergence of design-driven processes in the Sicilian territory around the valorisation of food is the realization in 2016 of the *Micromuseo Immateriale del Grano e del Pane. Memoria, conoscenza, interazione* of Borgo S. Rita (CL), together with the contribution of a team of teachers and some young Sicilian designers<sup>2</sup>.

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2. F. Monterosso, ideation, preparation, direction and scientific coordination; D. Emanuele and M. Di Piazza, director and script anthropological documentaries; G. Dioretico e S. Farruggia, direction and script for educational documentaries; L. Di Martino, graphics and communication; M. Schifano and M. P. Erice, Arduino and processing; U. Di Piazza, sound design.

The initiative started in 2013, when the Santa Rita Cultural Association was established, composed of women united by the objective of redeveloping the ancient village of Santa Rita, and preserving its historical, religious, cultural and gastro-nomic identity, in order to reactivate the economy of the village and make it a destination for Slow Tourism<sup>3</sup>. The multiplicity of skills and interests that generated the project idea led to the development of an original design laboratory, characterized by an intense dialogue with the community of Santa Rita and focused on communication and museum education, in particular as a resource and service for the local schools.

Today the Micro Museum of Borgo Santa Rita offers visitors an essentially visual journey, animated by some simple interactive and narrative devices. It proposes an experience that combines the scientific-educational with the historical-anthropological dimension of the memory of the small community, linked by the sharing of knowledge accumulated over time around the production of wheat and the traditional processing of bread practiced in the Borgo. A place was found in the restored nineteenth-century baronial building, which now includes: a series of infographics (static and animated) that illustrate the methods of cultivation of wheat and the traditional processes of making and production of bread, determining the particular taste and food qualities; some short documentaries bringing the visitor back to the specificity of the “cultural land-

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3. To transform the objective into a concrete project a loan was obtained from the LAG “Terre del Nisseno” in the framework of the PSR (Rural Development Program) Sicily 2007/2013, which had the purpose of redeveloping and making accessible for tourism development rural, the building heritage, culture and traditional activities of small rural villages.

scape” and to the immediacy of the testimonies of the inhabitants of the village; and small interactive sensorial installations that stimulate involvement, especially of younger visitors. Also the project of the Micro Museum of Borgo Santa Rita integrates and develops the wealth of experience acquired through research and educational experiments carried out within the university, around the themes of scientific communication: languages, tools, technologies for information design and communication that make even very complex scientific content accessible. But its primary aim was to explore the potential of the collaborative design dimension, through the construction of listening and sharing practices with the various actors of the project; an experience that has contributed to disseminating co-design tools and methods for social and cultural innovation in territorial development processes.



**Figure 1.** Giuseppe Maiorana, Identity image of the *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane*, Salemi.

## 5. The *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane di Salemi*: objectives, methods and tools

As a matter of fact, the transmission of innovative and collaborative experiences facilitated by design, which emerged in the cultural and territorial context of Salemi, and the need to propose a new exhibition space dedicated to “wheat and bread”, increased the awareness of citizens and visitors from the traditional ritual to the entire Salemitan landscape and to the various precious “stories” that are the foundations of the character of this community.

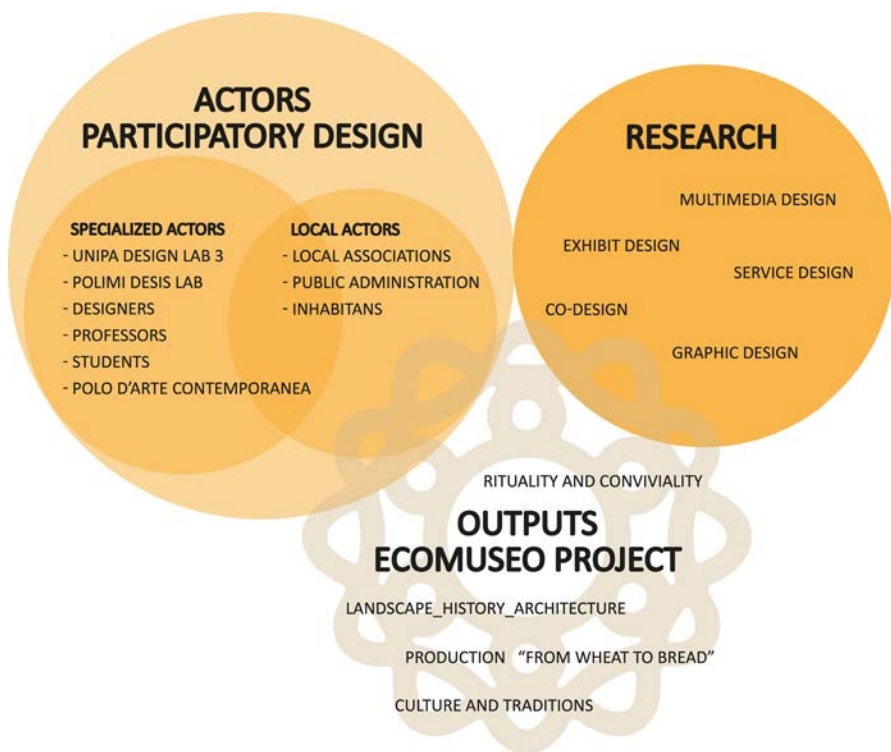
The Ecomuseum is proposed as a new section of the Civic Museum of Salemi; a real Museum System<sup>4</sup>, divided into different sections (archaeological, historical-artistic, Risorgimento, legality museum). To accommodate it, a little-known space of great historical and architectural interest, built in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, has been reopened to the public probably as the seat of the Congregation of the Holy House of Loreto, a building reproduced in the architecture of the underlying Oratorio that bears the same name.

The municipal administration sought the contribution of design through the involvement of the University of Palermo and its design students, in sustaining and constantly discussing a path of didactic experimentation.

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4. Located in the heart of the historic town of Salemi, the Museum System is housed in the monumental complex of the Jesuit College, built in 1652, and is located next to the Chiesa Madre (Chiesa del Collegio), whose outline of the apse is incorporated into the profile perimeter and volumetric of the museum complex itself. Born as “the dwelling of the Jesuit order”, thanks to the initiative and funding from the work of Don Giuseppe Gangi, the College was over the years also the seat of the schools of Philosophy, Moral Theology and School Theology. Thanks to an agreement between the Curia Vescovile of Mazara and the Municipality of Salemi, in 1986 the complex was restored and adapted as a museum complex, cultural space and municipal offices.

This was articulated, firstly through visits and meetings with the various actors (in particular the women who make the loaves and belong to the cultural associations), and in the university seat through thematic laboratories, often interdisciplinary, which concerned the definition of a new visual identity of the Museum System of Salemi.



**Figure 2.** Diagram of process, themes and actors of the project of the *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane*, Salemi.

After a phase of research and exploration of the territorial context (graphic and photographic surveys) and the analysis of the results emerged from meetings and interviews with the various territorial actors (administration, associations, art-

ists, entrepreneurs, experts of local history and traditions), developed especially with the skills of the Desis Lab, the project team composed of teachers and students has focused on some specific objectives of the project:

- to organize a significant setting for the artifacts (videos, photographs, bi / three-dimensional works) born from the experiments carried out in recent years on the occasion of the celebrations of St. Joseph<sup>5</sup>, especially through “artists’ residences” curated by the Department of Culture, with the support of the Museo di Arte Contemporanea Riso of Palermo;
- to mend the works, different for techniques and languages, in a unitary space-time path, through the introduction of communicative, informative and narrative elements and essential exhibition supports, developed by the team of designer (students and teachers).

The first objective required the cataloging and evaluation of the physical and symbolic characteristics of the works of artists owned by the Municipality of Salemi, necessary for a first hypothesis of placement in the museum space. Whereas the second objective has seen the work of teachers, students and experts develop mainly on three themes, closely interconnected and dialoguing with each other:

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5. Born from the desire to “promote a reflection on how to continue today, centuries later, a tradition, or how that same tradition can generate new forms that can be easily found in our everyday life” (Maiorana, 2017), the four editions, from 2015 to 2018 of the exhibition *Ritualità, tradizione e contemporaneità del pane. Verso la costituzione dell'Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane*, curated by Giuseppe Maiorana, involved several artists in the reinterpretation of the theme of bread and ritual.



- the processes of cultivation and production “from wheat to bread”;
- the rituality and conviviality in the “dinners” of the Feast of St. Joseph;
- the landscape, the history, the architecture of the Salemitan territory.

Within these three themes, thanks to the support of the Salemitan community and the various interdisciplinary experts (agricultural sciences, anthropology, sociology, architecture, history of the territory and landscape), the students have produced the communicative artifacts - infographics and multimedia - that completed the design process, which coincided with the construction and opening of the ecomuseum in March 2019.

#### TERRITORIALITY



HISTORY AND  
ARCHITECTURE



ARCHEOLOGICAL  
SITE OF MOKARTA



BAGLI



VILLAS



#### “FROM WEATH TO BREAD”



FROM PROCESSES  
OF CULTIVATION TO  
PRODUCTION OF BREAD



#### RITUALITY AND CONVIVIALITY



**Figure 3.** Scheme of the three main themes of the project of the *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane*, Salemi.





**Figures 4, 5.** Processing of Salemi's decorative breads. Credits: Sandro Scalia.

## 6. Infographic and multimedia installations

The exhibition path starts with a graphic representation of the historical and productive origin of ancient grains in Sicily: through maps, timelines and other infographic devices, information regarding the cultivation of wheat in Sicily in relation to historical events is transmitted that have determined the diffusion and location, the variety of grains and the different characteristics of the species. This is followed by a panorama of the many forms and iconography of bread typical of the various sacred occasions. Finally, a display is proposed of the different elements of the process together with decorated breads of all sizes and shapes, and a boxwood structure that contains the ritual of the supper of St. Joseph. This provides the visitor with a visual synthesis that immediately communicates an important economic and symbolic centrality of the production of wheat and bread in Sicilian communities (somewhat declined in various sacred and profane aspects), which associate work, ritual and feast in the definition of community identity.

Another element of the multimedia narration, developed by a group of students, is the video *Salemi and its territory*<sup>6</sup>, which proposes an excursion into the Salemitan landscape, through videos that the authors have developed in a sort of “dialogue” with the extraordinary photographs of Mimmo Jodice. The flow of images through the rural areas narrates the richness of the material heritage located in the territory.

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6. Project by L. Mistretta and T. N. Anh Pham, Industrial Design III Studio, Prof. Viviana Trapani. The video takes the name and some materials from the book Venezia F., & Jodice M., (1991). *Salemi e il suo territorio*, Milano, Electa.

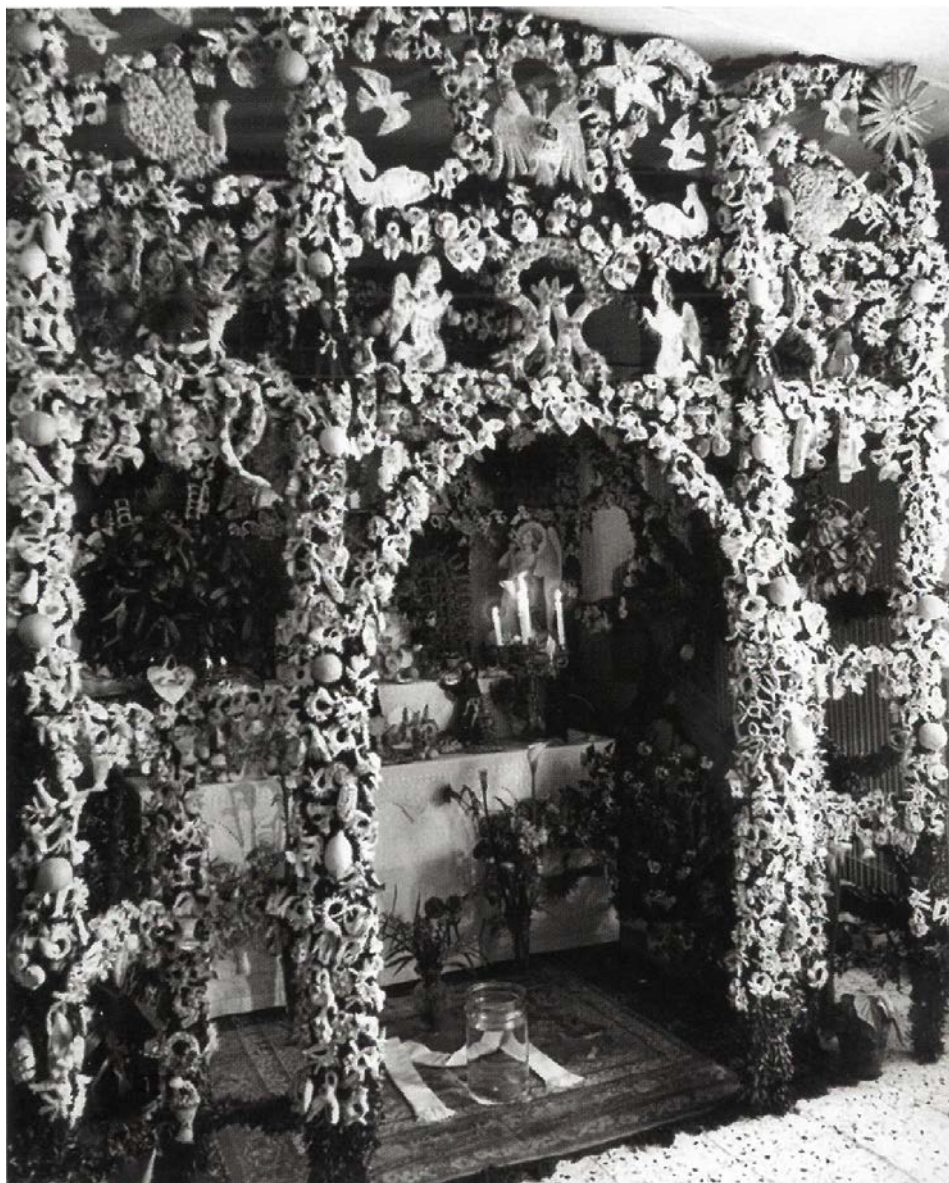


**Figure 6.** Mistretta L. & Anh Pham T.N., Screenshot series from the video *Salemi e il suo territorio* placed inside the *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane*, Salemi.

Against the background of the rural landscape, photographed in its purity and rawness, some viewpoints of particular historical and environmental significance are particularly highlighted: the important prehistoric site of Mokarta; the nineteenth-century villas in the countryside of Salemi; the grandiose *bagli*<sup>7</sup> which protected the fields cultivated with wheat, and that still today – even if only roughly – mark the topography of the landscape around Salemi. By integrating the aerial photographic views with written information, pictograms, ideogram and colored backgrounds, the large number and the widespread distribution of the wheat fields in the Salemitan landscape are highlighted; images that interpret and immediately communicate the complexity of the information on which the work was based.

7. *Baglio* is the term used in western Sicily to refer to a farm, often fortified, which developed around a central courtyard.





**Figure 7.** *Cena di San Giuseppe* (1983), Fondo Mimmo Jodice, Municipal Library “Simone Corleo”, Salemi. Credits: Mimmo Jodice.

The Festivity of St. Joseph, which has its own characteristic trait in the meticulous preparation of the breads for the subsequent realization of the decorated altars, culminates with the ritual performance of the *Cena*. In the past, this consisted in offering a sumptuous lunch to three disadvantaged children, who act the parts of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, as a fulfillment of a vow or as a thanks for a grace received. During the ritual dinner, the “saints” are served one hundred dishes, based on the preparation of ingredients closely related to the earth, such as traditional vegetables, flour and wild herbs, but with the exclusion of meat, forbidden during Lent.

This ritual made up of reiterations of actions, gestures and sounds is inspired by *Il Pranzo dei Santi*<sup>8</sup> a multimedia elaboration that “stages” the rite through a lively visual dialogue between the objects, food and hands of the guests, with the support of an essential scenography, consisting of a table, which houses the projector, and three chairs. In this case the set of a supper of St. Joseph was recreated, for a reinterpretation of the very personal and contemporary ritual: a culmination of all the phases, the gestures, the courses, the words and the sounds that accompany the dinner. Thus, the viewer is allowed to experience a dream-like and magical experience of ritual conviviality that still fascinates and involves them.

## 7. Conclusions

The experimental project of the *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane di Salemi* was based on a strong collaboration between different actors: public administration, inhabitants, associa-

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8. Project by M. G. Martinez Tagliavia, Industrial Design III Studio, Prof. Viviana Trapani.

tions and universities. However, the processes of communication and interaction have not always been linear and have required, especially at the beginning, a phase of careful observation and listening by the designers.

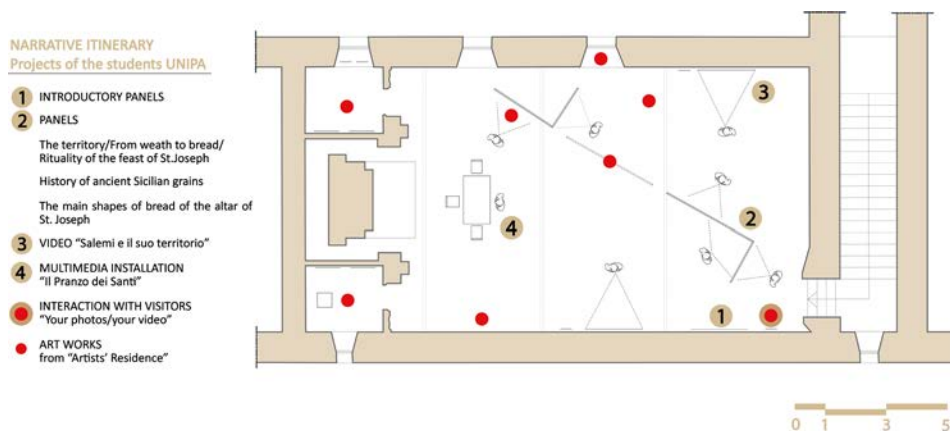
As a matter of fact, while the collaboration with the administration was based on cultural assumptions and objectives strongly shared by the team of designers, the dialogue with the associations of expert artisans and with other local actors has been more complex and discontinuous. Complexity generated by their marked awareness of the centrality of their role and also of the stringent work times imposed by the deadlines of the feast.

However – as already experienced on other occasions – the students were the essential figures of mediation between project and context, thanks to their ability to propose themselves not so much as project specialists, but above all as young people in search of their cultural and professional identity. And also as the natural recipients of a precious legacy of the past, multi-faceted and widespread in everyday life.

Experience has highlighted the importance of an interdisciplinary and inclusive approach, both in the interaction and collection of materials for the project, and in the more strictly didactic and design phases; the teaching activity has indeed promoted the direct relationship between the students and the different competences involved in the elaboration of the communicative artefacts in all the phases of the project. It has deliberately renounced to a homogeneity of the products to favor instead very personal and sometimes authorial elaborations. The Polimi Desis Lab, through various meetings and inspections, has constantly monitored the project and provided

scientific and educational support especially in the development of a coherent design methodology, with the aim of experimenting with models and practices of social innovation focused on design and adaptable for the different resources and territorial dynamics.

Some of the objectives of this project and in general of these forms of collaboration have already been achieved and appreciable, other certainly still need to be monitored and increased through subsequent activities and project actions. However, they can be summarized as follows: to encourage a new multidisciplinary design method, which refers to human and social development; to expand educational opportunities and opportunities for exchange and research; to renew the forms of research and teaching; to encourage a responsible attitude; and to develop skills, competences and new values in future generations of professionals and citizens, aware and ready to respond to the ethical challenges focused on the territory in which they live.



**Figure 8.** Design of the exhibition. Site plan of the *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane*, Salemi.





**Figure 9.** Trapani V., Del Puglia S., Maiorana G., *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane* Exhibition, general view. Credits: Viviana Trapani.



**Figure 10.** Trapani V., Del Puglia S., Maiorana G., *Ecomuseo del Grano e del Pane* Exhibition, view of the Tagliavia Martinez M.G. *Pranzo dei Santi* installation. Credits: Viviana Trapani.



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